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Argentina: The Church Takes a Stand

Argentina's Roman Catholic church has issued its first official criticism of the military government. The statement, signed by 67 of the nation's 84 bishops, is the most significant expression to date of dissatisfaction with the regime. 1,2

In a lengthy document drafted during their semiannual conference, the bishops catalogued the reasons for their unhappiness with political repression in the name of counterinsurgency and economic austerity measures that generate hardships for workers and consumers. Although expressed in dispassionate terms, the statement was unequivocally critical. The bishops led off by citing the futility of their numerous personal, unpublicized appeals to government and military leaders for restraint as the reason for going "over the heads" of the officers and directly to the people. 1,2

Perhaps the most telling portion of the document was the bishops' assertion that:

> no theory of collective security, despite its importance, can cause the wrecking of the human being's rights, because social order and its progress and the order of things must be subordinated to the human being, and not the reverse. Altering this order and a mistaken idea of personal or social security have caused many people to tolerate and even accept the violation of man's basic rights.

The churchmen make no excuses for subversives, whose activities they deem a violation of "most basic human relationships," but they admonish government leaders that "the meaning of being a Christian is the fulfillment of a commitment to self-restraint." 1,2

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The bishops met for nearly a week at the conference and probably had considerable difficulty in making the decision to express their criticism openly. It has been clear for some time that many of the bishops have had serious misgivings about the regime, but most have been reluctant to place the church in a position of confrontation. Indeed, as recently as last month, most churchmen still seemed reluctant to take a concerted stand, as evidenced by generally apolitical Easter sermons throughout the country.

The church has hesitated until now to take on the government because most churchmen--like most Argentines--see no real alternative to the regime. They probably also fear that their criticism could weaken the relatively moderate President Videla, opening the way to still harsher practices. Few clerics sympathize with the leftists the regime is battling; the church, as well as most Argentines, welcomed last year's coup, seeing in it the advent of stability and an end to flagrant corruption.

Whatever hope the bishops had that there would soon be improvements may have been dissipated by recent developments. One is the "Graiver case," which, whatever its factual basis, appears increasingly driven by politically motivated "hardline" officers bent on discrediting both influential civilians and "populist" officers. In addition, the arrest of former president Lanusse--during the course of the bishops' meetings--appears to have been similarly motivated. It is likely too that the Papal Nuncio, a longtime critic of the regime, was instrumental in encouraging the church to take its stand.

The bishops have taken a calculated risk by going public with their criticism. While they clearly hope to add momentum to international efforts--notably by Washington--to curb human rights abuses, their position could prove counterproductive. Some military men will view the church statement as an unwarranted intrusion into secular matters over which the officers should have uncontested control. Some officers may even conclude that the church supports or at least sympathizes with leftists, if not outright subversives. Indeed, a small number of priests

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do have ties to the left, and several clerics were killed by security forces last year in an apparent act of retaliation.

The church stand also seems likely to contribute to a sense of isolation and defensiveness on the part of the regime. Its criticism is the most categorical to date by a major civilian sector but is by no means the only major expression of dissatisfaction. Labor challenged the junta early with a series of strikes in defiance of a ban on such activity. The officers are also undoubtedly uneasy over efforts by politicians and journalists to campaign for an early "political opening" even though the regime is clearly prepared for such an event. The criticism could increase the indignation of the "hardliners" and cause them to redouble their efforts to secure tougher controls on all aspects of national life. [redacted] 3.5(c)

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